

Chavez Says Russia Loaned Him \$4Bln for Arms

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CARACAS, Venezuela — Russia gave Venezuela a \$4 billion credit to buy weapons when President Hugo Chavez visited Moscow last month, adding to billions the socialist leader has already spent on re-equipping the army.

Venezuela and Russia have forged deep ties in energy and defense, with Russian investment flowing into the OPEC member's oil fields at the same time as Chavez has become one of Moscow's most important weapons customers.

Washington views with suspicion Chavez's purchases of tanks, fighter jets and air defense systems in the last few years, but the soldier-turned-president says he is merely modernizing Venezuela's aging kit.

"We were in Russia not long ago, and the Russian government has now given us a \$4 billion credit to help us with defense equipment," Chavez said Saturday at a ceremony to celebrate 90 years of Venezuela's air force.

"We are simply doing the task of defending the fatherland from the threat of empire and its allies."

Chavez gave no details of what equipment the money would be used to buy. In April, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had said Venezuela was considering \$5 billion of weapons orders.

Poor diplomatic relations between Chavez, who first won office 12 years ago, and the United States, which he calls an empire, led to a U.S. arms embargo against Venezuela in 2006.

Without access to spare parts, Venezuela's fleet of about 20 U.S.-built F-16 fighters has fallen into disrepair, giving Chavez a strong argument for buying new equipment from Russia and China.

Venezuela is awaiting delivery of tanks and air defense systems from Russia and is buying a dozen Y-8 transport planes from China.

Major General Jorge Oropeza said the government was negotiating the purchase of 10 to 12 of the medium-range planes, which have a 7.5-hour flight range.

Beijing has already sold Venezuela K-8 training jets and an extensive radar system to replace surveillance capacity lost under the U.S. embargo.

Also on Saturday, Chavez promoted General Henry Rangel Silva to the highest rank in the army. Rangel Silva is on the U.S. "kingpin" list because of accusations that he helped Colombia's FARC rebels smuggle cocaine.

Chavez says such charges are motivated by a U.S. desire to discredit his government and says recent military purchases such as the radar systems will help fight drug traffickers.

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